

Personal Essay

That Book

By Jenn Whittaker



I'm a thief. But I paid for it. Literally. I never returned, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay*, to the Ballston Library. That year my Virginia tax refund had a state penalty deduction of \$78.40. No criminal charges were ever filed.

The crime came after I flunked out of college once. It wasn't my first attempt to earn a degree and it certainly wasn't my last. It was an odd time in the middle when I registered for a course in Atomic History. That's where the fascination started – that class.

I'm certain I got an A in the subject even though I only showed up for a few lectures. I read. I read all nine books assigned for the course simultaneously – a few chapters from one book and then a few more from another book. I kept them on rotation and my head swam with questions; the books had answers. Even after my failure, I still craved a greater depth of understanding.

The Manhattan Project was the topic of interest at the Ballston Library that day. As I scanned the shelves of the nearly abandoned section on nuclear physics, covert projects for atomic fission, and subatomic string theory, my eyes rested on one book that wasn't like any other. I slid the hardcover copy off the shelf and read the sleeve. It described a planned art exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum encompassing the atomic bomb and the end of WWII. It was shut down the same year it was scheduled to open.

The year was 1995 – the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan – the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII. The original exhibition attempted to navigate the crossroads of an era when war and patriotism defined every nation. The Axis Powers lost; the Allied Powers won; and the bomb changed the world forever.

The attempt to mount an exhibition based on secrets at the highest levels of government during the war simultaneously coupled with an unblinking examination of the human casualties in Japan that came with the war's end was distorted, politized, negotiated, renegotiated, and, ultimately, undermined by fear...fear of facts and fear of dishonoring veterans of the war.

What I read in that book enraged me to my core. That book and its author, Martin Harwit, the ousted former Director of the Museum that designed the exhibit, gave me renewed purpose nearly twenty years after my fingertips first turned those pages.

It's no coincidence that through all the years in between then and now – joining the Army; moving to Germany; getting married; returning to America; getting divorced; jumpstarting a federal career; working from a GS-4 trainee to a GS-11 expert in my field; making four cross-country moves; leaving it all behind; embracing my true passion for writing; returning to college; finishing my degree – through all those years, I never lost my stolen treasure. I never lost that book. Everything else came and went like the rising and setting sun.

Why did I hold on so long? Because I have to tell that story – tell it to anyone who’s never read the book...and I will do it with a film.

The year was 2015. I Googled Dr. Harwit – an astrophysicist, academic, and writer. It was surprisingly easy to find his phone number online, so I called and asked if I could write a film script adaptation of his book. After we verified his right to do so with his publisher, he agreed.

I spent two weeks in D.C. conducting research at the Smithsonian Archives over the summer of 2016. While there, I met with Martin. He invited me to join him and his wife, Marianne, at their home the same evening.

As I entered, I was astounded to see original editorial cartoons that had been published during the year of national controversy over the exhibit before its cancellation. They were hung in frames cascading up the wall along the spiral staircase to the second floor. I found copies of the same cartoons at the archives only days earlier.

It struck me hard...twenty-one years after the cancellation of the exhibition, *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, Martin and Marianne embraced that time in their lives – that tumultuous experience. Collecting the cartoons was Marianne’s idea.

Over a robust red wine, we discussed my intentions for the adaption. I made it as clear as I could. I want to show the world what they were never allowed to see. I want to tell Martin’s story.

After substantial delay, I began writing the screenplay once again in April 2020. By then, Marianne had passed away. Even with such heartbreak and at 91 years old, Martin dove into the adaptation process and helped breathe new life into the project. After thirteen months, *Enola*, emerged complete. With relentless effort and a stroke of luck, one day, it will be coming soon to a theater near you.

That book – it isn’t done with me yet.

The Dining Room Window

By Lisa Torres



I was staring out of my six-pane dining room window after signing a contract for its replacement. In the bottom right is a crack from the upper left corner of that pane to the lower right. For a long time, this pane has been held together by a strip of blue tape inside and out. There is discoloring foam that was sprayed into the sides of the framework where the windows did not completely close. As I stared out the aged glass, I realized this cracked windowpane is me.

It's July in Florida, and looking out the dining room window I see a beautiful lush green garden that just a week ago was wilting, begging for rain. Now there are colors galore: the male cardinals' vibrant red and the yellow popping out from the buttercup beds. The morning sun filters through the swaying bamboo, and songbirds sing their morning melody, encouraging the others to chime in and ring in the day gloriously together. The sunlight shines into the dining room through the hazed panes bringing all of this beauty and a smile with it.

When looking past the haze and glaze from the summer elements, all this beauty can be seen and felt from the inside. If I don't take the time to separate the haze from the glass, the beauty on the other side is skewed, or never seen. Like me, the dining room window is transparent. Honest. Real. My scars, like the tape, keep my pieces together.

The Florida storms and intense rays of sunlight haven't diminished the window's lasting protection. But just like me, it's time to renew. Replace. Restore. This is not the end. Celebrate! Celebrate the renewal! A new view. Celebrate the retirement! Celebrate withstanding the storms life brought. A new window. A new view. A new me.

Purple Heart Day

By Steve Banko



August 7 afforded me a pretty special day recently. That day, of course, is National Purple Heart Day. My hometown boasts of many military heroes, among them Bill Donovan who was the head of the Office of Strategic Services, which would later become the CIA. To honor him, the county clerk created a roster of the names of county residents who have received the Purple Heart and named it the Bill Donovan Book of Merit. I was asked to provide some remarks at the ceremony and stood before a hundred or so honored guests. I was surprised to see a lot of familiar faces, faces I knew from a former time, a time of innocence, a time before we were sent to war.

Those guys and I went to different schools together, played sports against each other, and chased the same girls together. We got in a few scrapes but always remembered where we came from. Some of the guys were smart, others good looking, a few were great athletes but all were tough as a cheap steak. Running through us all was the commonality of being ordinary. Our dads worked in the mills. Our moms stayed home and raised us. None of our families was rich and if one of us was poor we didn't know it. We were just ordinary guys looking forward with uncertainty where our lives would lead.

Being ordinary was both a curse and a blessing: a blessing because we were all starting from the same place, a curse because being ordinary put us on the fast track to Vietnam. None of us were "fortunate sons" with connections or political juice that might have spared us from service. And that was OK because military service was another common threat in our collective lineage. We all had dads and uncles who served in World War II or Korea.

After my remarks, the names were being called to come forward. Some of the guys I knew personally. I knew all of them from their appearance. Some guys used walkers. Others got around on canes. Some of them carried a supply of oxygen with them. Others gutted it out and walked up with an unaided limp. I didn't know all their names but I knew the look in their eyes, a look I'd seen a thousand times, long ago and far away. Their eyes were set with an unmistakable determination. They were hardened by what they'd seen and endured but shone with a pride other veterans will always recognize. One name called belonged to an old friend of mine who had been a POW in Germany and was nearing his 104th birthday. There were some Korean War vets and a lot of Vietnam vets. There were several from our Middle Eastern wars.

And sadly, there were a couple of Gold Star mothers. They came forward to accept their recognition with their pride mingled with the continuing sorrow that ran down their cheeks and also the cheeks of some hardened combat vets.

The event didn't take but an hour or so but it was a reminder to us all what being ordinary cost us. The Purple Heart is the medal no one wants to receive but everyone respects. No soldier I know would part with after it was awarded because it signifies that the soldier honored his blood oath to risk everything for his comrades and for his country. As I watched the procession of these ordinary guys and women come forward funny thing happened. They didn't look so ordinary any longer. In fact they looked pretty special.

Selfless service will do that, I guess.

The Sharks of French Polynesia

By George Zebot

You find yourself below the equator in the turquoise waters off a motu in a distant lagoon and all you can hear in your head is your repeated challenge to your students of the importance of risk. Were you just paying lip service to going out on a limb or can you brave being out a mile on the reef and swim with the "black tips". Can you put the shoe on the other foot and actually back up what you asked of your class?

The motorized outrigger piloted by "Munoa" a strapping sun colored Polynesian, who can't stop chuckling under his breath, navigates us out to the rim of coral heads that ring the green volcanic island. The depth and saturation of color that you take in from the water, land and sky confirms that Gauguin was not a hyper-colorist but simply painted what he saw. Our watercraft is the typical South Seas canoe with an attached parallel pontoon. What brings it out of a Michner novel and into current time is the 125-horse Evenrude attached to the bow. As it glides effortlessly over shoals of multicolored fishes that look like liquid rainbows in a wet blue sky you are captured by the sheer transparency of the lagoon. You can see forever. Munoa kills the engine and we drift to a stop. I realize the jolt of adrenaline just under my flushed skin signals that it is time to enter the water. The safety of the shore might as well be ten times the mile it actually is. Although I have an unobstructed view I stand on the plank that was my seat on the passage out to get a better view of the approaching fins. Within three minutes there are dozens of 6-8 foot sharks patrolling the waters between the boat and the reef. Are they there because they've acquired a taste for tourists or do they know that the chum in the water is an easy meal? The all too familiar tune of "dum..dum.....dum...dum" plays in my head and I ask myself "am I really going to jump into the water?!!!!".

Swimming with alpha predators, the lynchpins of the food chain, has a way of taking you out of theoretical discourse and putting you face up with the visceral. This is not probability. This is the real deal. Our only instructions are to keep one hand on the anchor rope that is stretched out diagonally about 25-30 meters. This supposedly makes the five of us look larger as a group rather than random floating tidbits that might be easier pickings. I can't get over how I must look submerged like a hors d'oeuvre dangling in my mask and snorkel from the bowline. What is unexpected is how my fear is replaced by sheer awe at the grace of these creatures. Their ability to dart and change direction on a dime is startling but obsessively fascinating. As they cruise the area checking us out, eye contact is not something I even imagined. To look a seven-foot shark in the eye from about a foot or two away is primordial. To stare down the barrel of a set of jaws bearing directly down on you certainly stirs all sorts of genetic and ancestral memories. My companion is actually brushed by one of the sharks and I think I can actually hear a muffled scream underwater.

How Building Anatomical Models Almost Led Me to Become A Brain Surgeon

By Edward Diestel

When I was 10 years old, I became interested in anatomical models. I built all types of models, from the heart to the brain, models of the body, skeletons, organs to models of the human head.

My interest wasn't just inspired by models, but also by books and illustrations of the organs. I figured that being able to build these models would increase the desire of becoming a brain surgeon. Unfortunately, my interests in becoming a surgeon began to diminish, because of a lack of funding for education. If I only knew how difficult it would be writing my first term paper, and the cost of how much the education would be. Also, there was the issue of studying.

But if I could have mastered these challenges during high school, I may have been better prepared. But then again, that didn't prevent me from joining a Medical Explorer post at about sixteen.

“OLD GLORY—Lest We Forget”

By Embree Bolton

2020 The Veterans Day Program was a powerful, moving presentation that brought back tons of memories for me. As an octogenarian, I’ve been “around the block” a few times as they say in South Georgia, where these memories first began.

1946 When I started first grade in Hartsfield, Georgia, little did I know that I would witness a **“flag-burning”** that would affect me for decades. Mrs. Saylor, the world’s best first grade teacher, had us stand at attention as we discussed our personal responsibility to our God, our country, and our family—but more importantly, to ourselves. She talked about the war and became misty-eyed as she carefully explained the word “widow” to us.

Mrs. Saylor had a flag draped across her lap, and after the class recited the Pledge of Allegiance, we reverently touched the flag and counted the 48 stars. I became a “life-long” learner of the word “PRIDE.” Yes, the flag was **“burned”** deeply into my conscience, and it became the foundation upon which I built a love for America that has lasted for almost eighty years.

1966 The flag was **“burned”** again, shortly after I arrived in Vietnam, assigned to the 1st Infantry Division. “If you’ve got to be one, you might as well be a ‘*BIG RED ONE*’ was the battle cry!” Although I had been advanced infantry trained, I was assigned to the personnel office in the base camp at Di An. (Bob Hope quipped, “No matter how you say it, it’s still a four-letter word!”)

A buddy with whom I had gone through basic and advanced infantry training was assigned to the same field battalion for which I had originally received orders. The next day his body was returned to the base camp, draped in a brand-new flag, headed to Texas. The flag **“burned”** deeper into my memory bank!

1969 My family and some friends watched TV intently from my quarters in Germany, as we witnessed the number one event of the 20th century—“Man on the Moon!” The flag remains more than a half century later as a **“burning”** reminder of the tenacity and commitment of this free nation.

1976 My family and I were returning from Australia and were fortunate to spend our country’s Bicentennial Celebration in our newest state—Hawaii. Flags flying on the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor **“burned”** deeper, as our guide explained why the bodies will never be recovered.

1989 My wife and I both became teary-eyed as we attended Bellevue Baptist Church’s “Celebrate America” and sang, “God Bless America,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and “I’m Just a Flag-Waving American.” As a giant American flag was raised to fireworks, singing, and applause, “Old Glory” was **burned** again.

2001 The country ushered in a new millennium, but unfortunately, the average American had become complacent about the basic ideals of freedom—i.e., love of God – love of country.

In the early hours of September 11, 2001, my sister-in-law died from a brain tumor that had only recently been diagnosed. The family surrounded the bed in the hospice unit, and we prayed, shared special memories, and sang as we watched our loved one quietly take a final breath and slip into the presence of the Lord. As my wife and I headed home to prepare for the funeral, we discussed how fragile life is and reminded ourselves that no one is assured of tomorrow.

Little did we know that only a few hours later over three thousand would also step into eternity. The world's worst terror attack took place in our country, unlike anything the world had ever experienced. "Nine-eleven" awakened the spirits of Americans, and immediately flags could be seen everywhere—from houses, buildings, cars and trucks, to babies' strollers. The gauntlet was tossed and hundreds of thousands rose to the challenge. It was exciting to see "Old Glory" returned to her place of respect and honor.

2021 Here we are—twenty years later, and in my opinion, the country is in serious trouble. Destroying historical monuments, turning one's back on the flag, **burning it**, kneeling at the playing of the anthem, and rioting and violent protests are the outer symptoms of a deeper problem. It would behoove all of us to keep our guards up and be prepared to defend this country that my family loves, not militarily necessarily, but with the same fervor in which the country was formed.

My heart is heavy at a Supreme Court decision that permits **flag-burning** as freedom of speech. My personal conviction is that since this country did not allow **flag-burning** for over 200 years, something is dreadfully wrong with the "system" that now allows it. However, I do not think governmental protection is appropriate for the individual(s) involved, nor would I offer any publicity.

A FINAL NOTE If one could burn all the available flags in the country, I would still carry mine with me - - "**burned**" deeply into my heart and soul. Perhaps what is missing today is that there are precious few first grade teachers like "MY" Mrs. Saylor.

Request for My Service

By Edward Malloy

I am ready. My president has spoken and action is expected.

Pack your bags and get ready to go. The troops are prepared to fight for our rights. My Family has been told and my prayers beads are packed. I am fit as can be, my insurance is made out for next of kin.

Many of my friends are cheering me on as good luck is the word of the day. Some pictures of loved ones will be carried and things to remember are fresh on our minds. A change of clothes is all I need as the army will fit me like a king.

As we get ready to leave our family all line up to be kissed. All are excited as the troops are assembled and look right smart. Our uniforms are all pressed so nice and clean and our weapons are brand new and have to be shined.

May God bless you and keep you safe until I've returned.

God Bless,

EM

Retreat and regroup as we plan our return.

